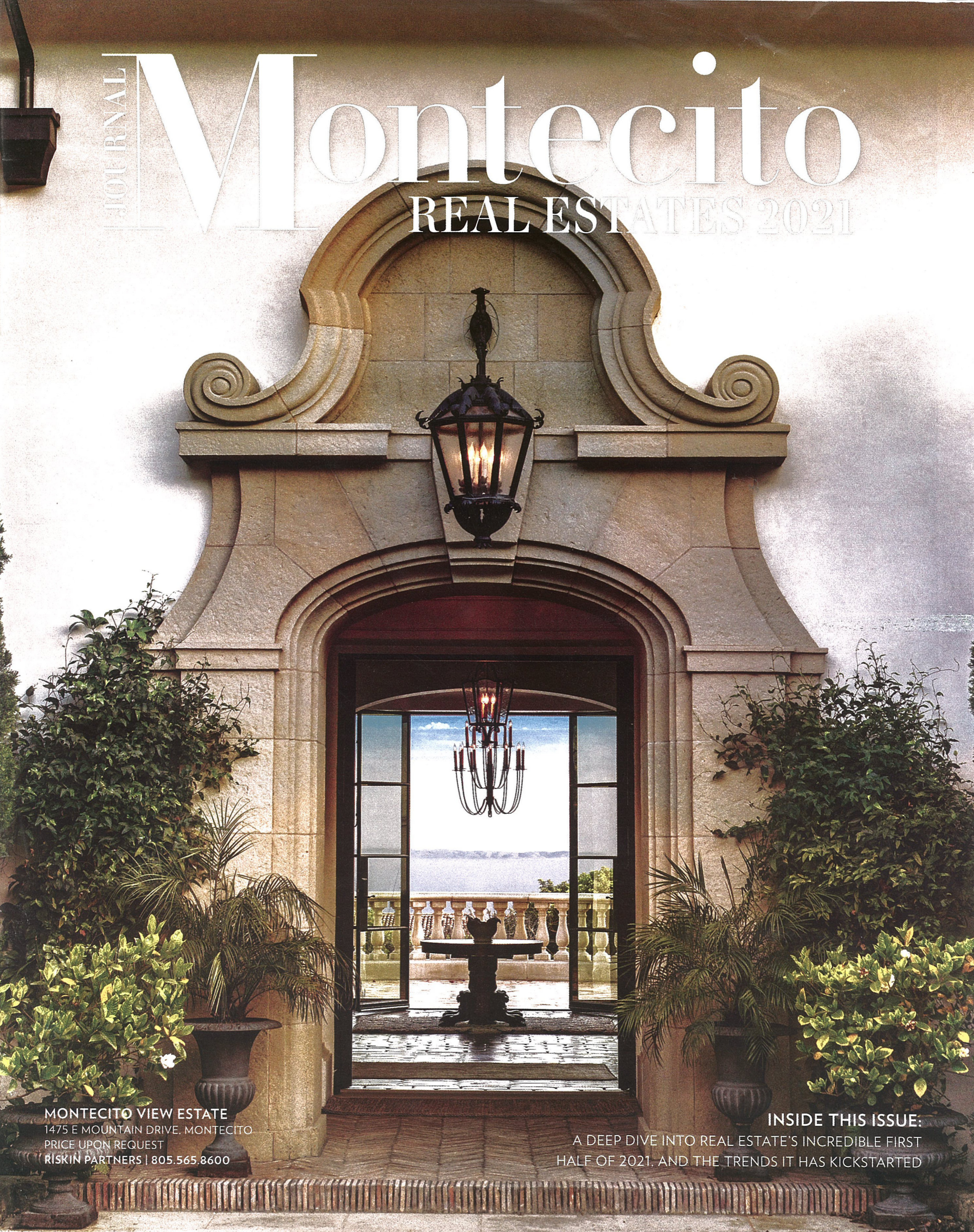


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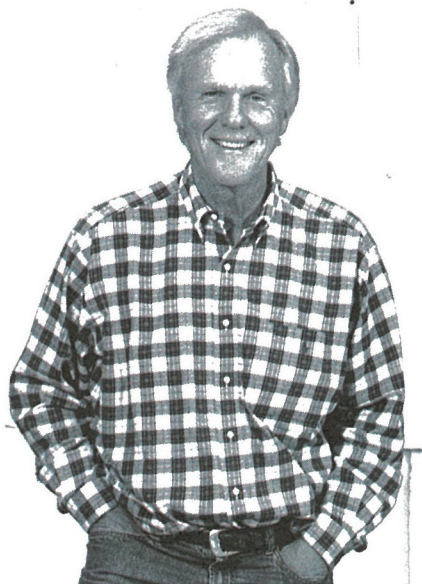
by Kia McNerny

A Celebrated Architect Makes Montecito his Home

Quietly and without fanfare, Montecito recently welcomed a legendary architect to our village. Though long a celebrity figure for his “elegant barn” aesthetic in rustic settings like Sundance and Napa Valley, it was with delight that we caught up with **Howard Backen** — at his desk overlooking Coast Village Road — hand sketching a new design for Montecito clients.

His new project will be located on a spectacular four-acre site in upper Montecito designated a “place of historic merit.” The land is part of a 47-acre parcel purchased in the 1900s by William H. Cowles, a local publisher, and one of the early hill-barons of the terrain between Eucalyptus Hill and Barker Pass.

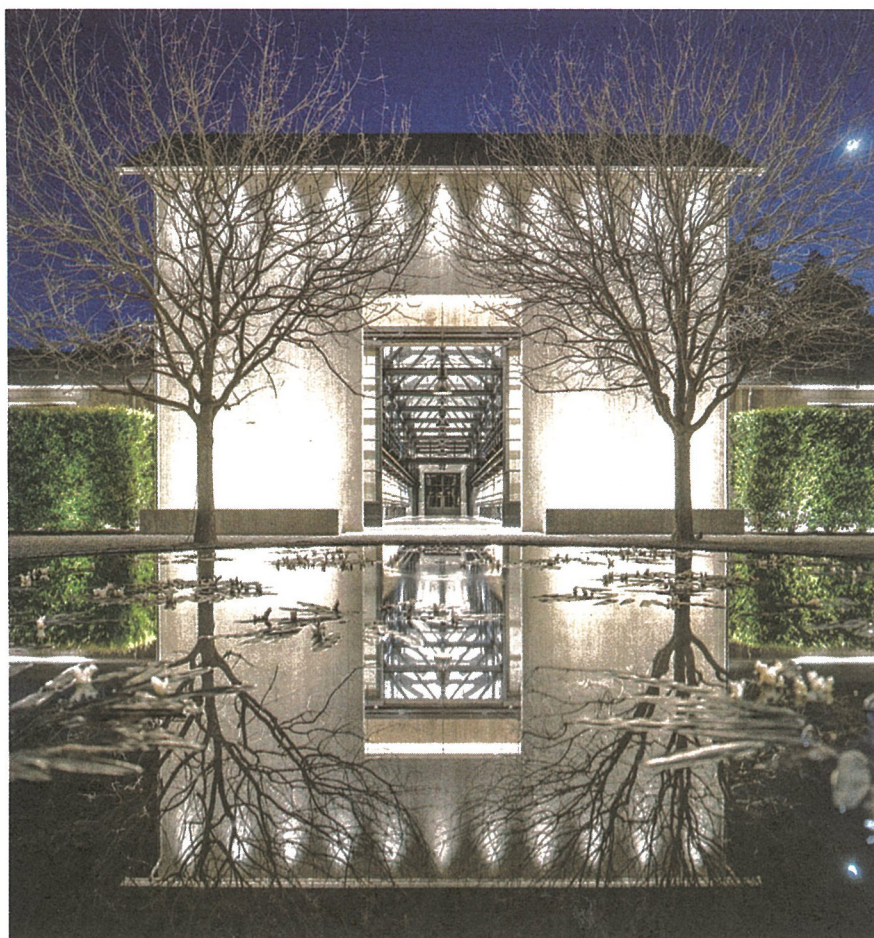
“The clients are very sophisticated,” Backen said. “They want a design with a European character, and they have the correct idea about it. The land is spectacular. Gorgeous hills, extended views, with an incredible piece of his-



Howard Backen has done work for the likes of Jeffrey Katzenberg and Ellen DeGeneres (Photo by Adrian Gregorutti)

tory — an existing reservoir with turn-of-the-century stonework.”

Southern California is not new territory for the architect. **Jeffrey Katzenberg** and **Ellen DeGeneres** are just two of his Southern California



Promontory Winery is Backen’s latest work (Photo by Patrik Argast)

celebrity clients.

Ellen, known for her savvy home renovations, hired Backen in 2014 to design a new, contemporary-style guesthouse for the 1929 Italian farmhouse she then owned. True to the architect’s ethos of complementing the land in his architecture, the magical setting of craggy hills and soaring eucalyptus shares the spotlight with the stone and glass structure.

The architect recently seized national attention with the June 2021 cover of *AD*, featuring the Los Angeles compound of **Mila Kunis** and **Ashton Kutcher**. Howard was bemused by the attention the story received.

“*AD* told me in the first days the issue hit the stands it generated 250,000 Tweets — that’s the size of a city,” he observed. “That’s never happened before.”

The excitement may reflect enthusiasm for the luxurious “entertainment barn” he designed for the couple, with nineteen-foot glass sliders and extensive views.

Other design elements the architect is known for are deck showers and meditation spaces. We mused about Santa Barbara’s cooler weather from that of the architect’s Oakville residence.

“I shower outside every day. A journalist once asked me, ‘What about when it rains?’ With the warm water and the cold raindrops, it’s a special freezing-hot sensation.”

The architect’s love affair with rusticity started when he was a boy.

“In Oregon where I grew up, there were a lot of barns. There’s a certain scale of a barn sitting in a field that’s magnificent — it creates drama in the landscape.”

There’s more than barns and rusticity in Howard’s impressive portfolio. His design for a Montecito-adjacent beach house features a 40-foot, column-free



Backen’s handiwork on a Montecito beach house (Photo by William Abranowicz)



Backen also does spectacular work on his own home (Photo by John Merkl)



Backen's style is on full display at the Rudd Winery (Photo by Adrian Gregorutti)

expanse of disappearing glass sliders, allowing the ocean to take over.

"I am often asked what style I favor, and my answer is always the same. I promised myself early on I would not have a 'style,'" he said. "I tend to design what is given. The site, the land, the

clients' wishes, carbon footprint, and avoid being a bad neighbor. I would not design a palapa for Montecito, as I did for a property in Mexico. Nor would I place a barn in Mexico, but I did in Napa Valley."

Speaking of his design process,

Howard sketches and draws all day long, using his sketches even for presentations.

"The computer is too slow. I simply don't want to use it."

Promontory Winery is the latest in luxe wine estates that Backen designed


for his longtime friend and client **Bill Harlan**. Their projects together include Harlan's first-class resort Meadowood, and Napa Valley Reserve, a private wine-making estate for members.

"We had just completed our work on Promontory," Backen said. "When it won Best New Winery for 2021, we said 'that will wrap it up, the final one — 30 years, every project together.' Two days later Meadowood burned in a wildfire. Bill called and we agreed — one more."

With the architect's strong ties to Napa Valley, why is he moving from Northern California?

"The fires in Napa Valley are really scary," he said. "We had to evacuate three times, and that is a big deal because my wife has a horse. It is very trying to evacuate and save your horse."

When it's time for us to leave, Backen shares his enthusiasm for his latest Montecito project.

"The design will arise from the site. This incredible piece of history, referencing what was there, and reflecting the owners' tastes and wishes. The land sets the geometry of the project — everything that will influence the design has been there forever." 



Ellen DeGeneres' entertainment pavilion, another piece of Backen's work (Photo by John Merkl)